

Already included in the bill we're considering is language that would create a Food Safety Commission, a mechanism for Congress, the administration, academia, industry, consumer groups, and others to work together on comprehensive food safety reform and recommend specific statutory language.

The Commission is tasked with studying the in our current system and making specific legislative recommendations to the President and Congress on how to improve our laws.

We have directed the Commission to do its work based on universally agreed upon principles—allocate resources according to risk, base policies on best available science, improve coordination of budgets and personnel.

This amendment goes further than that language. It directs the President to review these recommendations and findings and report his or her recommendations back to Congress in a timely fashion.

The language puts Congress on a track of holding hearings and moving such comprehensive food safety reform through the process.

Lastly, the language contains sense-of-the-Senate language that it is the policy of the U.S. Senate to provide our food safety functions with adequate resources, that we increase the number of inspectors looking at food shipments, and that it is vital for Congress to move forward with comprehensive food safety reform.

This amendment will compel the participation of all stakeholders in the Commission process and will compel Congress and the Administration to act on its recommendations.

I offer this amendment and ask for my colleagues to support this effort to modernize our food safety system.

Mr. HARKIN. I ask that the second-degree amendment be agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection? Without objection, it is so ordered.

The amendment (No. 3845) was agreed to.

Mr. HARKIN. I ask the amendment, No. 3539, as amended, be agreed to.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The amendment No. 3539, as amended, was agreed to.

CHESAPEAKE BAY WATERSHED CONSERVATION PROGRAM

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I wish to engage the distinguished chairman and ranking member of the Agriculture Committee in a colloquy.

Mr. HARKIN. I am happy to yield to my friend from Maryland.

Mr. CHAMBLISS. I, too, am happy to engage my friend from Maryland in discussion.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. Chairman, all of us who represent Chesapeake Bay watershed States in the Senate are grateful that the bill reported out by the Agriculture Committee recognizes the very serious challenge that we have with excess nutrients and sediments in the

bay. As I testified to your committee back in the spring, every year huge areas of the Chesapeake Bay and its tidal tributaries become "dead zones," which occur when there isn't enough dissolved oxygen for aquatic life to thrive. Not all the excess nutrients that create these dead zones come from agriculture, but a substantial part of them do. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Conservation Program in your bill will go a long way in assisting farmers in our States implement projects to better manage their nutrient-rich runoff. The new program represents a significant part of the \$700 million annually that scientists and agricultural experts estimate is needed on the ground to bring the runoff to ecologically acceptable levels.

My question is just to clarify the intent of the committee regarding this new program. Am I correct in my understanding that, although the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Conservation Program uses EQIP authorities, it has its own funding stream and therefore will not reduce the normal EQIP allocations to Maryland and the other Chesapeake Bay watershed States?

Mr. HARKIN. That is correct, Senator. Section 2361 provides an additional funding stream totaling \$165 million from 2007 through 2012 to address the critical needs of the Chesapeake Bay. This funding is separate from EQIP and is not intended to offset funding allocated under that program.

Mr. CARDIN. I thank the chairman for that clarification. I would like to ask the distinguished ranking member, the same question. Is it your understanding that the legislation before us today provides a unique funding stream for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Conservation Program without reducing the normal EQIP allocations to the Maryland and the other Chesapeake Bay watershed States?

Mr. CHAMBLISS. I am happy to confirm with the Senator from Maryland that he understands the provision correctly. The Chesapeake Bay Watershed Conservation Program is to be implemented by the NRCS in addition to EQIP or any other existing conservation program. The Chesapeake Bay basin is the watershed for our Nation's Capital and the Bay is a national treasure. The committee is providing this extraordinary support for this extraordinary watershed and its farmers.

Mr. CARDIN. I thank the chairman and distinguished ranking member for their clarifications. I invite both of my friends to join me in visiting the farms of the Chesapeake region in the coming year so they can see for themselves how effectively and enthusiastically these needed funds are being used to benefit both our farmers and our treasured Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Hawaii is recognized.

(The remarks of Mr. AKAKA pertaining to the introduction of S. 2462 are located in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. AKAKA. Mr. President, as chairman of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs I have tried to advance two pieces of legislation—the Veterans' Traumatic Brain Injury and Other Health Programs Improvement Act of 2007 and S. 1315, the Veterans Benefits Enhancement Act of 2007.

Once again, Members on the other side are objecting to moving forward with these bills—they are setting up a procedural roadblock. These bills deserve to be heard and debated and discussed, and I welcome that, but Republicans will not allow that to happen. Let me make that point again—we are only asking for debate. Not for the immediate passage of the bills that the Senate simply pass the bills as reported by the committee. Surely it is not too much to ask that the Senate be allowed to do its business.

Earlier today, the former ranking member of the committee, Senator LARRY CRAIG, made the latest objection for himself and for the Republican leadership.

This is new territory for a VA bill. When Senator CRAIG was chairman of the committee, he and I negotiated on a variety of legislative initiatives leading up to our markup but could not reach agreement on a number of matters. At the markup, I offered amendments on a number of the issues about which I had strong feelings. I did not, however, continue to pursue those matters on the floor. And I most assuredly did not do anything to block Senate consideration of the legislation that I had sought to amend. In fact, as ranking member, I worked with then-chairman CRAIG to gain passage of the legislation by unanimous consent.

There is much in S. 1233, the committee's omnibus VA health bill, that needs to be enacted, like an increase in the reimbursement rate for veterans who must travel long distances for VA care, and vital provisions to help veterans from becoming homeless. Never, in my memory, have we let a disagreement on one provision stand in the way of passing a legislative package, especially at such a critical time.

Senator CRAIG feels most strongly about allowing middle-income veterans to enroll for VA health care. In 2003, the Bush administration shut the doors to these veterans, and since that time, hundreds of thousands of veterans have been turned away. I want to be clear that these veterans are not asking for a free ride. Indeed, they will be required to make copayments for their care. What they are asking for is entry into the system. We estimate that 1.3 million veterans want this opportunity. And some in this body are standing in their way.

Many veterans have been denied VA health care under the current ban. Take, for example, California, where over 22,500 veterans have been denied enrollment; or Texas, where 23,800 have been denied access since 2003. This phenomenon is not limited to the larger States—17,000 veterans in Pennsylvania; 12,300 in Illinois; 36,000 in Florida; and over 14,000 in North Carolina have all been denied VA health care.

Also, I want to clarify that we are not talking about allowing veterans with “upper-income” entry into VA care. While the administration, and some of my colleagues, characterize Priority 8 veterans as “higher-income,” that is not necessarily the case. The current income eligibility threshold for VA health care is under \$28,000 a year—which can hardly be classified as a “high-income” salary. In my home State of Hawaii, where the cost of living is one of the Nation’s highest, the average salary for a veteran who has been denied is \$39,300 a year.

It is not just in Hawaii, but in many other States as well. For example, in South Carolina, the threshold is \$31,650 a year; in North Carolina, \$32,000 a year is considered low-income. These are not meaningless numbers—the dollar values represent the hard work of veterans who have served honorably and are now earning well below the median income for their area.

No, these are not poor veterans. But one devastating illness without health care coverage, and make no mistake about it, they will be impoverished.

Many of these veterans do not have any other form of health insurance. A recent study conducted by researchers at Harvard University found that nearly 1.8 million veterans are uninsured. This suggests that there are veterans in Priority 8 who are stuck in the middle between not making enough money to afford their own private insurance and making too much to qualify for VA care. No veteran who served their country honorably should be denied care when they need it because they were fortunate enough not to have been wounded in combat.

I also urge Members to read the text of the contested provision relating to Category 8 veterans. If the Secretary of Veterans Affairs sees opening up enrollment as too much of a financial burden, the Secretary could simply publish a decision in the Federal Register to again block these veterans. Congress is not seeking to overstep the Secretary’s authority to determine who can come through VA’s doors.

Finally, Senator CRAIG calls the inclusion of enrollment for middle-income veterans, a “last minute” addition. I say with a smile, that while time does seem to stand still in the Senate, I would remind my colleague that the bill enabling full enrollment was introduced last April, it was the subject of a hearing last May, and was marked up by the committee in June. This is not something that can be characterized as a “last-minute” change.

Now I turn briefly to address concerns raised about S. 1315, the committee’s omnibus veterans benefits legislation. The proposed Veterans’ Benefits Enhancement Act of 2007 is a comprehensive bill that includes benefits for a broad constituency of servicemembers and veterans, particularly those who are service-disabled. Provisions in this bill would also improve benefits for World War II Filipino veterans, virtually all of whom are now in their 80s or 90s.

While not providing Filipino veterans living outside the United States with benefits identical to those provided to veterans living in the United States, I am satisfied that the provisions in S. 1315 are equitable and should be adopted. It is important to note that S. 1315 would fix a historical wrong.

Filipino veterans served under the command of the United States military during World War II. They were considered by the Veterans’ Administration, the predecessor of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to be veterans of the United States military, naval and air service until that status was revoked by the Rescission Acts of 1946. Therefore, as a matter of fundamental fairness and justice, Filipino veterans’ benefits should be similar to those of other veterans.

Those who oppose the pension provision in S. 1315 argue that the pension that would be provided through this legislation is too high. However, pension benefits are designed to allow wartime veterans and their survivors to live in dignity—above the poverty level. I am satisfied that the levels of pension designated in this bill would allow these veterans to live with such dignity, while finally giving them the recognition that they so richly deserve.

I urge my colleagues on the other side of the aisle to take a good look at the facts surrounding the provisions contained in both S. 1233 and S. 1315 that some on the other side are objecting to, and to realize that opposing these bills on the current basis provided effectively denies valuable and meaningful benefits to our Nation’s veterans.

In closing, I again stress that all we are seeking is a time agreement that will allow for debate. For those who believe that there are provisions in these two bills that should not be approved by the Senate, offer amendments, debate the merits, let the Senate vote. That is the least we can do as we seek to meet the needs of our Nation’s veterans.

Mr. President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

Mr. SALAZAR. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. HARKIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that there now be a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

TRIBUTE TO BRIGADIER GENERAL BENJAMIN J. SPRAGGINS

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, I wish to take this opportunity to recognize and say farewell to an outstanding Air Force officer, BG Benjamin J. Spraggins, upon his retirement from the Air Force after more than 34 years of service. Throughout his career, Brigadier General Spraggins has served with distinction, and it is my privilege to recognize his many accomplishments and commend him for his service to the Air Force, the Congress, and our grateful Nation.

Brigadier General Spraggins is a longtime resident of my home State and devoted public servant of Harrison County, MS. He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force on March 17, 1972. After over 6 years of successful enlisted service, reaching the grade of technical sergeant, Brigadier General Spraggins received his commission from the Academy of Military Science, McGhee Tyson, TN. Following graduation from Officer Candidate School, Brigadier General Spraggins completed aviation school at Mather Air Force Base, CA, and RF-4C training at Shaw, Air Force Base, SC. Brigadier General Spraggins was then stationed with the 187th TRG at Dannelly Field, AL, flying the RF-4C fighter aircraft. While stationed in the 187th, Brigadier General Spraggins served in many critical positions, including instructor, scheduling officer and assistant chief of standards and evaluations. He flew the RF-4C from 1979 to 1983 and was a weapons instructor in the F-4D from 1983 to 1988 at the 187th Fighter Wing. Brigadier General Spraggins completed his military flying career with over 2,500 hours in the T-37, T-43, RF-4C, and F-4D aircraft.

On September 23, 1987, Brigadier General Spraggins was assigned to the Combat Readiness Training Center, Gulfport, MS. During his tenure at the training center, he served in various positions, including range control officer, director of operations, operations group commander, and finally as commander of the Combat Readiness Training Center. As commander, Brigadier General Spraggins was responsible for operations and training of over 20,000 military personnel annually and provided oversight for a \$75 million budget.

Concurrently, Brigadier General Spraggins was sent to Andrews Air Force Base, DC, in 2002 to run the Crisis Action Team for the Air National Guard. In 2003, he also served as the commander of the 186th Air Refueling Wing, where he was responsible for operations of KC-135 aircraft wing, with